

## The Concept of “School” From Viewpoint of School Principals and Students: A Qualitative Study

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### Abstract

Schools where educational activities are conducted in an effective and active way are considered to be one of the important institutions for the society. Considering from this aspect, the purpose of this study is to define what schools which are so important for educational activities and the society mean and what are the reasons of their existence. As a research method, qualitative research has been used in the study. For the analysis of qualitative data, content analysis has been done by using Nvivo 8 program. In accordance with the purpose of the study, it has been asked the views of school principals and students who are considered to be inside customers. While the perceptions of school principals are always positive about the concept of school, some negative aspects are identified in students' perceptions. When the reasons of schools' existence are examined in detail, it is noteworthy that the students express more views than principals and they are different compared to principals. The “Future Anxiety” theme occurs as a remarkable finding which is stated by students and under which most views are placed.

**Keywords:** School, School Principals, Students

### Introduction

One of the main objectives of the education is to provide social change and innovation (Kocabas, 1997). However, educational needs differ according to structure, expectations and qualities of the societies. Educational approach in postmodern times is considerably different from educational approach in industrial societies. Children in industrial societies were grown totally like robots. Children were evaluated with grades of harsh and strict grouping systems in such environments that were far from individualism and they faced teachers' authoritative attitudes. The extent of these attitudes and approaches differed according to societies' characteristic qualities (Tezcan, 2002). Children grown in these environments inclined to adopt these features in their adulthood and maintain them. On the other hand, in post-industrial societies, while machines have started to do routinized works, people have started to do the works in which they can use their knowledge, intelligence, and creativity. Therefore, the adolescents are supposed to be taught all sorts of possibilities about the future and visible changes (Tezcan, 2002). These changes in industrial and postindustrial age have significantly changed schools' roles and reasons of their existence.

According to Aydin (2002) as cited in Kramer, invention and development of cuneiform script took place in Sumerians schools. Some of the first written documents are asserted to be clay tablets prepared as worksheets and examinations in books prepared by writing teachers in B.C 3000. In excavations belonging to Sumerians, hundreds of tablets were found in which students wrote all sorts of daily school assignments in 1st half of 2nd millennium. Thanks to these tablets, lots of important knowledge related to Sumerian Schools and education in those schools have been obtained. In the historical process after excavations about Sumerians, schools transformed into bureaucratic institutions. Main determinants of a school to be a bureaucratic institution are those that they are big, complicated and multilevel social institutions and full time professionals work in schools (Aydin, 2002). On the other hand, when it is considered in general meaning, it is known that schools are not only bureaucratic institutions. The roles and responsibilities of schools which have changed and developed in time have affected the views related to their existence (Balci, 2007; Illich, 2005; Sisman, 2002).

Main objective of schools -which have maintained their existence since the first civilizations until now- is to provide children with opportunities to socialize and identify with society. However, this expectancy for socializing and identifying differ among societies. The only way to understand whether schools fulfil their duties or not is to decide what people request (Ratner, 2010). To understand what people request is rather difficult because they all have different characteristics from each other. Therefore, they may have different claim and wishes.

Schools have also social, politic and economic responsibilities. Its social responsibility is to socialize the child and impose the culture. While politic duty of the school is to provide the generation's loyalty to government, its

economic duty is to meet brainpower and manpower needs of the economy (Bursalioglu, 2005). Actually, schools cover the past, today and the future. Schools have serious responsibilities to protect and maintain these aspects. According to Aydin (2002) as cited in Kowalski and Reitzug, objectives of schools are summarized in Table 1:

Table 1. School objectives according to different philosophical approaches

Philosophical Approach	School Objectives
<b>Humanism</b>	Referring to the reality that the world does not change, schools' objective is to transfer unchanging universal realities and improve minds.
<b>Existentialism</b>	There is a dominant understanding related to the situation that the world is developing and changing slowly. From this perspective, schools' objective is to transfer existing cultural elements and introduce everything composed by history.
<b>Social Realism</b>	Schools' objective in this approach is to make sure that existing thoughts and values are transferred to students and help the students comply with the society.
<b>Experimentalism</b>	It is believed that change is inevitable. Schools' objective is to grow individuals who think critically in order to solve problems.
<b>Reconstructivism</b>	As in the experimentalism approach, it is believed that change is inevitable. Schools' objective is to decide what society in future want and prepare the students to transform society into its future condition.

As understood in Table-1, all philosophical approaches give different meanings to the concept of school and they define different objectives related to school. These objectives vary and are prioritized depending on the philosophical approach of the society.

As a result of the calculations made by Sonmez (2008), in a fifteen-year-educational life of an individual from primary school to university graduation, he/she exists at school for only 332 days. This situation shows that the time passed at school has a little place in an individual's life but its effect spreads over his/her whole life. This short time has not only individual-based effects but also society-based effects. When the schools are considered within this context, it is remarkably important what the schools mean and why they exist. This study attempts to reveal what a school means and the reasons why they exist by asking the views of school principals and students who are determinants of school.

## Methodology

Qualitative research has been used as a research model in this study. In a qualitative research, collected data cannot be degraded to numbers as in quantitative research. Although some numerical operations can be done with data, main purpose is to provide the reader with a descriptive and realistic picture about the research topic (Yildirim and Simsek, 2011). In addition to analyzing a social problem deeply, in a qualitative research a researcher begins with what and how questions and then he continues with 'why' questions (Creswell, 1998). Quality of qualitative data substantially depends on methodological competence, sensitivity and honesty of the researcher (Patton, 2014).

Study sample of the research includes 61 school principals and 87 undergraduate students considering the principle of volunteering. Before collecting data, participants are given general explanations in short meetings. After these explanations, participants are given interview forms on condition of taking them back within the day. For the reliability of the research, it is important to obtain a larger quantity and more accurate data by treating participants equally (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

In the research, participants are supposed to answer those questions;

- What does a school mean? Explain.
- What are the reasons for existence of schools? Explain.

Interview forms collected from participants have been used as main data source. The views asked by using these forms have been transferred to electronic environment.

Participant opinions for each question were examined one-by-one, and irrelevant or insufficient statements were

marked as invalid. Valid data were coded in code lists as “A1, A2, A3,..., A61” and “S1,S2,S3,..., S87” and these opinions were placed under the categories. Because participant opinions concerning the interview questions were placed under more than one theme, the numbers of accepted opinions were higher than the number of participants. Findings were transformed after linking the opinions together. Several concepts, which were identified based on the findings of the analyses, were modeled so as to reflect the relationships in between. Outstanding participant opinions are presented in their original forms.

The categories and interview data were examined by field experts, necessary arrangements were carried out on subjects with “consensus” and “divergence”. The “Percentage of Agreement (P) = Consensus / (Consensus + Divergence) x 100” formula, as developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), was used to confirm reliability of the data obtained from the content analysis. Reliability values calculated above 70% (Miles & Huberman, 1994) are accepted as being reliable for qualitative studies. Reliability of the study was found to be 83%, and therefore the study was recognized as being reliable.

## Findings

The answers for the first question “What does a school mean? Explain.” have been categorized as school principals and students. Although there are common themes in both study groups, there are also different themes. Thematic demonstration composed by categorization of participants’ views has been given in Figure -1 :

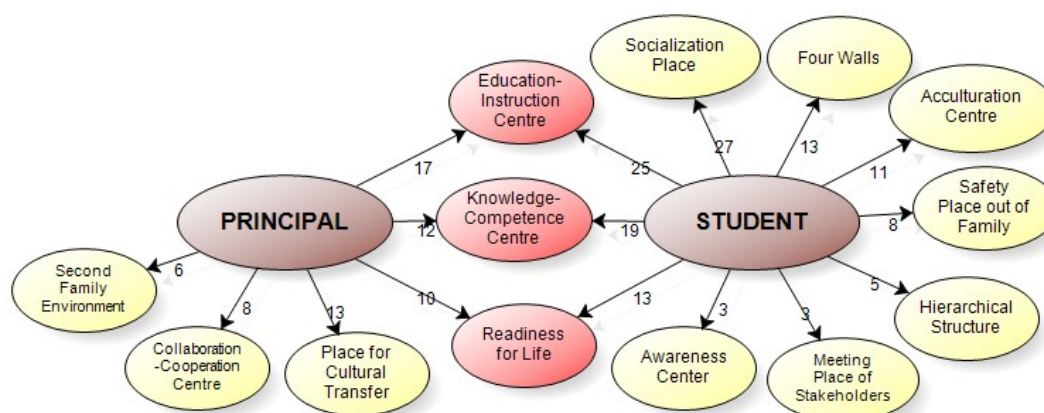


Figure-1. Perceptions of participants Related to Concept of School

When Figure-1 is examined, it is possible to see the thematic demonstration related to principals and students’ views about concept of school. Regarding principals and students, 66 views and 127 views respectively have been included in evaluation.

The views of principals and students show similarity in three themes. These themes are categorized as “**Education-Instruction Centre**”, “**Knowledge-Competence Centre**” and “**Readiness for Life**”. The highest number of views among principals gather under the theme of “**Education-Instruction Centre**”. Under this theme, principals have expressed 17 views and students have expressed 25 views. When the theme of “**Knowledge-Competence Center**” are examined, 12 views by principals and 19 views by students have been addressed. In the category of “**Preparation for Life**” which is also a common theme, 10 views by principals and 13 views by students have been included in the analysis process. Some of these views together with their themes have been given below:

A13: “They are formal and private institutions which can be controlled and which work for the purpose of meeting individuals’ educational and instructional needs.” (Education-Instruction Center).

S3: “They are buildings which are assigned for educational-instructional activities with teachers, students and school administrators and various educational equipment and instruments in it.” (Education-Instruction Center).

A21: “They are places where all sorts of knowledge, competence and habit are learnt regularly for specific purposes.” (Knowledge-Competence Center)

S12: “They are places where we – the students- have knowledge and competences that we are required to have. These knowledge and competences are provided us by educators.” (Knowledge-Competence

Center)

A6: *"They are institutions which prepare students for life both academically and in terms of competence."* (Readiness for Life).

S40: *"School is the real life. Schools prepare the students for life. Students who are educated in schools get their occupations which they will maintain throughout their life thanks to the education in schools."* (Readiness for Life)

When the other views of school principals are examined, it is seen that they express their views under those themes respectively; **"Place for Cultural Transfer"**, **"Collaboration-Cooperation Centre"** and **"Second Family Environment"**. Attention-grabbing ones among the views of school principals are given below together with their themes:

A33: *"They are places in which the outcomes of common mind, experiences, cultures in a society are accumulated and institutionalized. Schools are places in which traditions, customs and cultural values of a society are transferred to the next generations."* (Place for Cultural Transfer).

A52: *"In an institution which comprises of school principals, teachers, students, the other personnel and the families, everything is shared together. In environments where mutual sympathy and tolerance exist, there also exist cooperation in addition to collaboration."* (Collaboration-Cooperation Centre).

A47: *"They are one of the cornerstones that affects children's lives after their family. It is a second place where the child spends time in safety in addition to acquiring a certain identity."* (Second Family Environment).

There are seven themes under which school principals' views do not fit into but only students' views can be placed. These themes are generally related to the perceptions that can be generated within the scope of students' experiences. Themes emerged after the analysis and some views under them have been given below:

S23: *"A school is a place in which children at certain ages -defined as students- socialize with each other."* (Socialization Place).

S55: *"A school can be defined as a place with four walls and the top closed. They are monotonous places where stereotyped knowledge is transferred to the students in all the same way. Sometimes it is like a prison; sometimes it seems like a factory."* (Four Walls).

S70: *"A school is a place that enables people socialize and transfer the culture mutually. It can be also defined as an acculturation center."* (Acculturation Centre).

S64: *"They are institutions in which educational and instructional activities can be carried out safely out of family environment. In schools, both students and families can move safely."* (Safety Place out of Family).

S15: *"They are central places in which what the system offers is transferred and applied hierarchically from superior to subordinate."* (Hierarchical Structure).

S7: *"Schools are places in which all personnel as teachers, students, janitors, security officers come together for educational purposes under one roof."* (Meeting Place of Stakeholders).

S37: *"They are educational-instructional centers in which students and their families analyze or -will analyze- the current potential."* (Awareness Center).

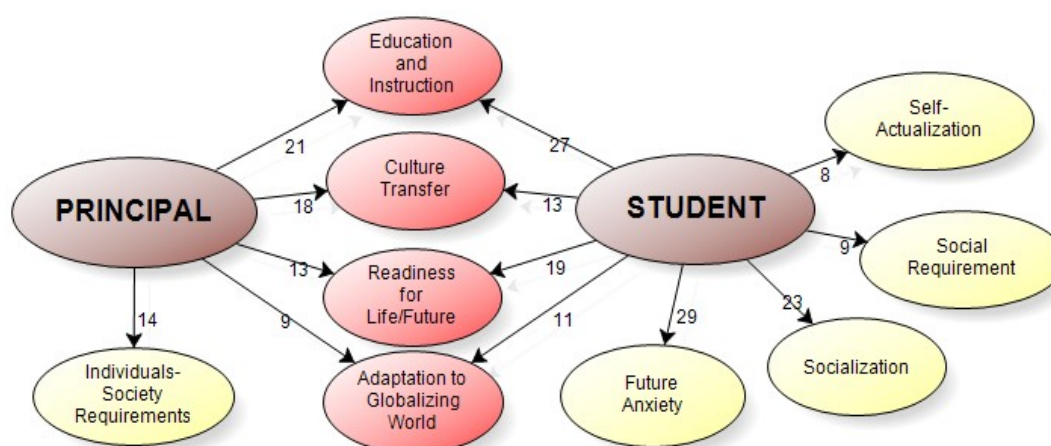


Figure- 2. Perceptions of Participants about the Reasons of School Existence

When the Figure-2 is examined about the reasons of schools' existence, it is observed that 75 views of school principals and 139 views of students have been placed under proper themes. As it is in the concept of school, there are also common themes among both groups' views about the reasons of schools' existence. 61 views expressed by school principals and 70 views expressed by students have been collected under four common themes. "Education and Instruction" theme is a common category under which most views have been expressed by both school principals and students. The views expressed by school principals are respectively placed under those themes; "Culture Transfer", "Readiness for Life/Future" and "Adaptation to Globalizing World" but this order is slightly different when it comes to students. Students' views are respectively placed as "Education-Instruction", "Readiness for Life/Future", "Culture Transfer" and "Adaptation to Globalizing World". Some common views expressed by both school principals and students are given together with their themes below in their original forms.

A44: "To conduct educational and instructional activities, to develop ideal citizens who protect the future of system in accordance with basic aims of National Education." (Education-Instruction).

S49: "The reason why schools exist is due to carrying out educational and instructional activities. I think, that is the only purpose. Therefore, it is required to be in a regular system." (Education-Instruction).

A38: "Schools exist for the purpose of shaping our future by combining doctrines and values of the past with today's values and science." (Culture Transfer).

S61: "Reasons for school's existence are to provide opportunities for mutual interactions in which social relations develop and acculturation occurs." (Culture Transfer).

A25: "To enable individuals to gain knowledge, skills and abilities that may be required in the following years. They also prepare them for life in vocational and technical aspects. They grow as educated, aware, modern, mentally and physically healthy people. And these people create communities at the same quality." (Readiness for Life/Future).

S72: "The reason for schools' existence is because of gaining new information and experiences, enhancing quality of life, and keeping pace with the life. Moreover, it is a structure that prepares individuals for their lives and jobs in the future." (Readiness for Life/Future).

A18: "Schools are responsible for developing individuals as reasonable, questioner, researcher and adaptable to changing and developing world in line with program's assumptions." (Adaptation to Globalizing World)

S81: "Schools are institutions that exist in order to enable people to improve themselves in compliance with the requirements of the contemporary age. One of the core aims of schools is to have a competitive power globally or adapt to the situation." (Adaptation to Globalizing World).

When the Figure-2 is examined, it is observed that school principals have 14 views about the reasons for existence of schools under the "Individuals-Society Requirements" theme. Some of the views together with



this theme have been given below:

A9: *"They exist to educate young people and prepare them for life according to the requirements of the society."* (Individuals-Society Requirements).

A2: *"Schools should not be obligatory places for teachers, students or principals. Reasons for existence of schools are to enable people to gain a place as individuals in society, improve their self-confidence, gain ability to make decision."* (Individuals-Society Requirements).

Students who have participated in the study have expressed more detailed views about reasons why schools exist. 139 views have been expressed by the students in total and 69 of them have been placed under different themes. 29 views of students have been incorporated into the **"Future Anxiety"** theme. A sample view under this theme has been given in its original form:

S29: *"I am sorry to say that the reason why schools still exist is because of the anxiety that people feel. To get a diploma for a job to earn their life in the future. These diplomas guarantee their future. This is an important reason for existence of schools."* (Future Anxiety).

Another theme that contains students' views is **"Socialization"**. The views in this theme generally emphasize that reasons for school existence have a positive place in socialization. Additionally, while nine views are placed under the theme "Social Requirement", eight views are placed under the theme **"Self-actualization"**. These themes together with some sample views are given as examples below:

S83: *"The reason why schools exist is to prepare individuals for the social life by being together. Instead of a lonely life, give an opportunity to live together with others."* (Socialization)

S31: *"Schools are necessary to have a successful, self-confident and decisive generations for a country to develop. Schools are the most important places that will meet this requirement."* (Social Requirement).

S69: *"They provide individuals with the support to determine their places in the society, to support them in vocational and psychological areas. Moreover, they serve as a bridge for individuals to access where they want to be."* (Self-Actualization).

## Conclusion and Discussion

This study -conducted for the purpose of examining the views of school principals and students about the meaning of school and the reasons of their existence- have been carried out with 61 school principals and 87 undergraduate students. The data in study has been collected with interview forms developed by the researcher. Collected data has been analyzed with content analysis. Some statements of participants that are considered as important have been given in their original forms. Within the scope of study, participants are asked those questions; "What does a school mean? Explain." and "What are the reasons why schools exist? Explain."

The views of the participants about the concept of school have been analyzed individually. While the views of school principals are generally positive, there is some negativeness in students' views. School principals' views are gathered under six themes in total and three of these themes are common with students. These common themes are "Education-Instruction Centre", "Knowledge-Competence Centre" and "Readiness for Life". These common themes mostly refer to the readiness for social life. It is addressed as a common perception that schools are home that prepare individuals for life.

When the views of school principals are examined in detail, a highest number of views have been included into the common theme of "Education-Instruction Center"; however, most of the views of students have been included into the theme of "Place for Socialization". School principals also have addressed that schools are a "Place for Cultural Transfer", too. The lowest number of views expressed by the school principals are under the theme of "Second Family Environment". Perceptions of pre-service teachers about schools have been examined by metaphors in the study conducted by Mahlios and Maxson (1998). The results of this study indicate that the most preferred metaphor is family metaphor. Teacher candidates' and students' regarding schools as family environment increases the importance of regulations and arrangements in school environment to a large extent.

Students' expressing more views about the concept of school has also provided the emergence of different themes. The most remarkable ones among these themes are "Four Walls" and "Hierarchical Structure". Thanks to these themes, students have expressed their negative views about school. While the views like 'it is like a prison, dungeon with four walls closed' are placed under the theme "Four Walls", the views like "Hierarchical structure in social life is redundant" and "superior-subordinate relationship is too rigid" have been placed under the theme "Hierarchical Structure". As a result of the study conducted by Nalcaci and Bektas (2012), 57 teacher

candidates expressed such metaphors as hot pepper, barn, hell, detention camp, desert, prison, scraps, nightmare, madhouse under school category as a negative environment. In contrast to these views, schools should be such places where all individuals in society can feel comfortable, safe, and free. Most students wish that they can know their teachers well, be close with them and develop friendship and confidence in their relationships (Sisman and Turan, 2004). Considering from this viewpoint, the biggest responsibility in resolving negative views falls over shoulders of teachers. Teachers can provide students with opportunities to develop positive attitudes towards schools.

After the analysis of views related to school concept, participants' views about the reason/s of existence of school have been investigated. There emerge four common themes obtained as a result of views of school principals and students. These common themes include "Education-Instruction Center", "Culture Transfer", "Readiness for Life/Future" and "Adaptation to Globalizing World". Related to reasons of existence of school, the most frequently expressed views among school principals are concentrated on "Education-Instruction" theme; and student views are concentrated on "Future Anxiety". While school principals view the reason of schools as a necessity and preparation, students think school is a anxiety-derived requirement. Another attention-grabbing theme among students is "Self-Actualization". There is found no view expressed by school principals which can suitably fit into this theme. Nine views out of all student views are incorporated into this theme. In this case, it is possible to infer that schools are perceived and interpreted away out of their purpose. The reason of schools is basically students and to educate them (Karatay, 2011; Ozden, 2005; Ulug, 2003). Also, their fundamental purpose is to make sure the development of quality of social life by helping new young generations grow up in a healthy and efficient way (Murat, Aslantas and Ozgan, 2006) and in order to succeed this purpose, they make effort to lead to a behavioral change in students in accordance with objectives, principles and programs (Kaykanaci, 2003). It becomes so crucial to analyze the views of students -the major reason of schools-; because their views provide significant insights related to which actions to do in future and what things to be changed. Considering from this point of view, practitioners are expected to put emphasis on expressed views and perceptions.

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